

The old intangibles

"Numbers," a Roman general once remarked, "are nearly always the decisive element in a conflict. Unless, of course, the numbers are roughly equal, or if other factors — the training of the men, the leadership of their officers, the advantages of the field — are unbalanced." Spirit, training, knowledge of the enemy — these factors, though invisible on a balance sheet, are important determinants in armed struggle. The outcome of the Falklands, and the wars in Lebanon and Iraq, in essence ratify that ancient military maxim.

On the Falklands, the British whipped superior numbers and home-based fighter jets with superior training and discipline. In Lebanon, Israeli troops and American weapons defeated Syrian armies, PLO terrorists, and Soviet weapons with surprising ease. Outpopulated more than 100 to one by its Arab neighbors,

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pugnacious Israel survives and expands. In the mountains of Afghanistan, an underarmed, underfed, outnumbered band of rebels peppers the mighty Soviet bear with pesky rounds of buckshot.

The Reagan administration's planned defense buildup pays needed attention to whopping Soviet numerical advantages in strategic nuclear weapons, conventional ground forces, and a number of components of air and naval strength. History knows, however, that the decisive edge may accrue to the side which masters the old intangibles.

The Reagan report card on these vital matters, impressive to date, runs as follows.

Personnel: A solid A. Re-enlistment rates dipped to below 50 percent under the Carter administration; they have remained above 65 percent under Reagan. For the first time since the inception of the all-volunteer army, all three services met their recruiting goals in 1981; in fact, they topped them. There has been quality, too. In the 1970s, two of every three new recruits were high school dropouts. Today, two out of three are high school graduates.

Part of it has to do with the delivery of some long-overdue pay hikes for servicemen. Part, though, has to do with Ronald Reagan's unapologetic attitudes towards the military itself. "Never again," the President promised the West Point class of 1981, "will our armed forces be the object of scorn and derision." American servicemen are once again allowed to wear their uniforms in Washington, a practice banned during the Vietnam era. The honor of military service has been affirmed, with some tangible rewards for the country's military posture.

Intelligence: An A for effort, a B-plus for results. The Soviet Union still outspends the

United States by a factor of five or six to one on information-gathering, but the Reagan budget allocates budget increases of more than 50 percent over five years to our various intelligence arms. In addition to the planned funding beefup, the President offers the promise of protection. It is now against the law of the land to reveal the identity of an American intelligence agent. Next on the agenda, though, must be a rein or two on the Freedom of Information Act, which continues to impede the orderly collection and protection of information vital to national security.

Chemical warfare: A flat C here, worst grade on the card. To its credit, the administration has taken note of the Kremlin's chemical stockpile, and some efforts to improve combat readiness, such as the use of live and simulated chemicals in certain NATO exercises, and has asked for steps to improve American hardware. Ships and tanks are at last being built with sealing compartments and other measures designed to protect them from destruction by a single chemical shell.

But there should be more of this preparation, less pleading with Congress to let the U.S. military manufacture new chemical weaponry of its own. Arming American soldiers with binary toxic weapons is not only futile (the Russians are well-drilled for chemical combat) but diplomatically distracting. It puts us on the same level as the Soviets. To its credit, Congress rejected the Reagan proposal to produce binary chemical weapons and stuck with our real needs.

Training: Another A-minus. The United States has finally pulled out of last in NATO riflery exercises; with Spain and Greece in the alliance, we might make the first division. U.S. pilots have held their own in joint air and helicopter operations in West Germany. So far, so good.

Research and Development: Another solid A. If military history teaches anything, it is this: no technology is ultimate. The arrow replaced the rock, the musket the arrow, and the tank the machine gun. The healthiest portion of Ronald Reagan's \$213 billion planned 1980s defense budget is the research and development column of more than \$20 billion.

Which technologies to develop, which to discard — such choices will remain the subjects of heated debate. Just about the time the latest tool is ready for the assembly line, a new tool, or a new strategy, or the results of a new war leap up and shout, "obsolete." It happened to the B-1 bomber and the M-1 tank. And it has happened to a whole theater of action, the sea, now said to be an impractical medium of power in an age of modern aircraft and guided anti-ship missiles. We will answer that thesis at another opportunity.